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# Postmodernism in Anurag Kashyap's *No Smoking*

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**ABSTRACT:** Film is a modernist medium of storytelling; as it emerged during the late 1800s and early 1900s, through the onset of technological advancement in the form of camera, photography, and projection. However as the time has passed and the trends shifted from the early 1920s to the early 2020s, there appeared an advent of postmodernism, an even abstract school of thought often marked by its absurdity, and self-reflexivity, seep into cinema. Therefore this paper aims to understand the distinctiveness of Anurag Kashyap's cinema, through the examination of postmodernism in his 2007 directorial venture *No Smoking*. Exploring unconventional storytelling techniques employed by him to comment on a controversial socio-political subject matter. such as the infringement of the freedom of speech and expression by the government of India and the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC).

**KEYWORDS:** Postmodernism, Cinema, Hindi Cinema, Anurag Kashyap, No Smoking

## I. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernist thought appeared, as an aftermath of the second World War, as a response to modernism and its objective view of reality. Thus postmodernism challenged and deconstructed traditional narratives. This was done by self-reflexivity of the act of storytelling itself. Narratives became fragmented, non-linear, circular and unstable. Intertextuality, breaking the fourth-wall, pastiche, and satire as techniques take center-stage in cinema through 60s to 2000s. Whenever postmodern cinema is brought up within the context of Indian, or particularly Hindi cinema, a name that might be the most recurrent is that of Anurag Kashyap. One often avoids his filmography or at least the audiences of the 2000s and the early 2010s did so. Given the tidal shift in the audience's preferences, especially post COVID-19 pandemic, and the onset of the Indian New Wave cinema, it would be inaccurate to suggest Kashyap as one who might've been snubbed from the limelight. As a matter of fact, being one of the luminaries of the Indian New Wave, along with contemporaries such as Sriram Raghavan, Vikramaditya Motwane and Dibakar Bannerji, Kashyap is perhaps one of, if not the most influential directors of contemporary Hindi cinema. Kashyap's filmography might not exactly fit the mold of postmodern cinema, a category whose boundaries remain as fluid as water itself, however, Kashyap according to some, to a certain degree is also mainstream. Therefore, what is it about his films that make him stick out as a sore thumb among other directors of Hindi cinema?

Perhaps, it is the actors he collaborates with. Whilst other directors seek to work with famous faces such as the Khans, the Kapoors, Kashyap collaborated with the likes of Kay Kay Menon, Nawazuddin Siddique and Vineet Kumar Singh. Famous figures but fairly unknown when Kashyap first started. Or maybe the budget upon which his films are made, whilst directors like Karan Johar, who made movies which were shot in exotic locations such as the Alps, and Caribbean beaches etc. Kashyap would shoot his movies in the streets of Mumbai, illegally by hiding the camera in a van.

Maybe it comes down to the subject matters that he explores. Whilst other mainstream Bollywood directors were busy making family entertainer, romantic and comedy movies, Kashyap made movies like *Black Friday* (2004), a dark, grim and violent retelling of the 1993 serial Bombay blasts, a movie which was inevitably banned by the government. Or his first movie, *Paanch* (2003), a story about a group of five musicians who get themselves embroiled in a terrible situation when four of them decide to kidnap the fifth but accidentally kill him, loosely based on a real 1977 serial murder case from Pune. A movie which was banned by the Indian censor board and never saw a theatrical release.

Or perhaps it is the overall approach he takes to filmmaking and storytelling. Which becomes evident in his third directorial venture *No Smoking* (2007), a movie that was a product of the treatment received by his first two films. Frustrated by the Indian government and the censor board, he felt his freedom of expression being taken away from him. A sentiment that fueled him to pen down a film, where Kashyap would be at his most politically subtextual. *No Smoking* is often considered to be a touchstone of postmodernism within the context of Hindi cinema. The story

follows the life of the protagonist K, a rich, arrogant chain smoker. His wife threatens to divorce him if he doesn't leave his terrible addiction, something he is reluctant towards. He visits a rehab program where he is forced to sign a contract and enter into the rehabilitation program. From a superficial point of view the story appears to be a dark, nihilistic tale of an obsessive man who is unwilling to let go of his addiction. But a more careful study reveals it to be an allegory, a metaphorical tale that is actually not about smoking at all.

## II. KASHYAP AND K IN *NO SMOKING*

The film opens in a snowy Siberian landscape. The protagonist K wakes up in a wooden cabin, which looks out at the empty white landscape, this is supposed to be his subconscious. Water has been employed as a liminal space between the reality and his subconscious, thus every time he awakes from a dream he wakes up in his bathtub. The movie is equally satirical in nature as it is serious. There are moments in the movie where comic pop-up balloons appear on screen that display K's true feelings or thoughts in Hindi. The movie even addresses popular storytelling tropes and deconstructs them to present them as what they are. For example, when K's wife, while returning from a party in their car, suggests a solution for his addiction where he ends up detesting smoking altogether. In response to which K increases the music in the car: a trope where a character in an attempt to ignore another character's idea increases the music. But in *No Smoking* the music that K increases actually sings, "Shut up. Just shut up, shut up," in a rhythmic tone.

It is through the unapologetic character of K that the audience witnesses Kashyap's frustration with the government and the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). The protagonist becomes the author surrogate and represents his struggle. A struggle to regain his lost freedom of expression. Everyone around K, his friends, family, his own wife try their best to coerce him into leaving his habit of smoking, thus cigarette becomes a symbol of freedom, and this scenario is directly taken from Kashyap's personal life, where he saw his parents, friends and even acquaintances suggest he make different, more mainstream movies.

*"My father didn't understand my cinema. He always appreciated the movies my brother (Abhinav Kashyap) made and used to tell me that this is real cinema."*  
(Kashyap, 2019)

One of the primary reasons why *No Smoking* is often considered a postmodern movie is because of its very apparent absurdity. Certain aspects of the movie are specifically placed within the narrative to confuse the audience. This absurdity therefore is kicked into fifth gear especially when K visits the Pryogshala (the rehab center). A friend who had successfully completed the program suggests the program to him and presents him with a business card of the organization. Visiting the address he is faced with an old, dilapidated carpet store. Asking for the Pryogshala he addresses the old store manager, who takes K's palm and places it on a futuristic biometric scanner.

*"EXT. INT. KALKATTA CARPETS- DAY  
Old man looks at his face, then at the table, pulls out a drawer...which inside of it has a touch screen...touches it, on the screen...waits..."*  
(Kashyap, 2007)

The story is densely populated with such contrasting element which confuses the audiences just like it confuses the protagonist, K. For example, when K is taken into the Pryogshala and asked to take a seat in the waiting area where he shall meet the head of Pryogshala: Guru Ghantaal Baba Bangali, but before him he is met by a dwarf man, with a very deep voice. Then enters the antagonist of the story, the so-called Baba Bangali. A shrewd, manipulative almost dictatorial figure. Told to be a literal friend of Hitler. This characters thus represents the authoritarian CBFC, which robs filmmakers of their voice and bans free speech on very illogical grounds. K is forcefully enrolled within the program on literal gunpoint and is told that if he smokes a cigarette and then his brother will be killed. And so on and so forth with every cigarette that he lights he will face perilous consequences. This presents a Kafkaesque narrative with K fighting every step of the way to regain his lost freedom. Anurag Kashyap's first introduction to English Literature was *The Trial* by Franz Kafka. A story which talks about Josef K, a bank clerk, who is arrested one morning, put through a trial and by the end of the story, executed, without once mentioning to him or to the reader, what was his crime. Kafka, inspired by his personal life, presented his protagonists undergoing severe agony and peril for no apparent reason. With them being powerless in front of an authority, stemming from Kafka's relationship with his father. Baba Bangali is a similar personality that literally says,

*"Guruji: Prajatantra uppar hai waha mrityu lok mei. Wahan sabko apni baat rakhne ka haqq banta hai. Yahan tum dharti se neeche utar kar aaye ho patal ghar mei. Yahan mera kaha Purana hai. (The court of law*



*is up there in the mortal realm. There people have a right to place their word. Here you have descended from the earth down to hell, where my word is the ultimate truth.)”*  
(Kashyap, 2007)

Kashyap constructs a predatory world around the character of K, with a satirical undertone, a world that actively wants K to fail. For example, a scene in the second half of the movie depicts K being held by a group of men, whilst his friend forcefully places a cigar in his mouth and lights it whilst singing the Happy Birthday song. The consequence of which is that K’s wife is murdered by the Baba and his men. This attempted to signify the contradictory behaviour of the govt, which on one hand promoted freedom of speech and expression and simultaneously reprimanded filmmakers and storytellers for doing the same. Having created such a movie Kashyap packaged it as an anti-smoking campaign movie for a successful theatrical release, collaborating with actor and producer John Abraham, a relatively famous face, to ensure a return on investment.

*“I had to lie a lot. And I lied till the day of the release. I made everybody believe, this was an anti-smoking movie. I was felicitated by the health ministry.”*  
(Kashyap, 2007)

Unfortunately, the Indian audiences were not ready for such a densely layered, political allegory. And the film became a commercial flop, collecting a revenue of mere Rs.3 crore against a budget of Rs.23 crore.

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is more than apparent that Kashyap’s 2007 directorial venture *No Smoking* stands tall among the postmodern movies of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century which includes the likes of *Run Lola Run* (1998), *Pulp Fiction* (1995), *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Matrix* (1996), *Oldboy* (2003) and many more. Featuring certain characteristics such as fragmented narrative, absurdity, satirical and political commentary, and criticism. Taking inspiration from the likes of other postmodern authors such as Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky, Kashyap has skilfully crafted a narrative that confuses and disconcert the audience and marks the vilification of the protagonist K by a world that actively tries to strip him of his autonomy. A very persistent character otherwise, K eventually buckles and loses his two cigarette holding fingers, a metaphor for losing his freedom, left to be just a shell of his prior self. Thus, through the allegory of *No Smoking*, Kashyap aimed to present a cautionary tale about totalitarian control by a central authority that tries to restrict every aspect of public and private life.

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